

Recognizing, Preventing, and Recuperating from Teacher Burnout

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Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the malady of teacher burnout. Burnout is a condition teachers may reach in which they are emotionally and physically unable to carry out the demands of their teaching profession. Teacher burnout will be explored by reviewing a number of professional articles on the topic. These articles point to burnout being largely connected to teacher stress. Burnout will be defined and broken down, and ideas will be presented as to what causes burnout in the teaching profession. Ideas will also be presented on how to prevent burnout. The end goal of this research is to enable the teacher to continue to perform their work to the best of their abilities. The teacher should be able to perform these duties without feeling drained, incapable and unprepared for the demands of the teaching profession which are so often associated with burnout.

Burnout is a common phenomenon for teachers, and yet it also somewhat of a “white elephant”. Although many teachers across age, ethnicity, gender, and even location, burn-out, burnout is seldom addressed in educational circles. Nearly ½ of all new teachers will leave the teaching profession within their first 3 years of teaching due to burnout. According to Ruth Botwink (2007), in New York City more than 25 percent of mid-career teachers, and 30 percent of newer teachers, plan to leave the teaching profession in the next 3 years (Botwink, 2007). This is what Ope and OBrien (2002) label as a crisis in terms of hiring and retention of professional educators.

Nationwide, burnout will statistically cause more than half of all teachers to leave the teaching profession. Largely, this migration of professional teacher burnout is related to stress. As Yong (2008) has stated, “an increasing number of studies show that teachers have on of the most stressful occupations”. One who has been involved in classroom education does not need studies to repudiate the inherent stress that inundates the educator each day.

The importance of understanding burnout cannot be overemphasized, from both the personal and professional level. When a teacher burns-out, feelings of dread, isolation, and a lack of enthusiasm can accompany the burnt out teacher all through the day. A teacher’s professionalism is greatly diminished. Why therefore, is burnout not commonly acknowledged among educators, and why are prevention strategies for burnout not discussed? It is possible that the lack of education about teacher burnout has duped a many would be excellent teachers.

From an organizational standpoint, Yong (2009) states that teacher burnout is responsible for affecting a schools study climate, morale, and attainment of educational objectives. Teacher burnout also has an undesirable influence on students. Yong (2009) states the individual effects of burnout are just as damaging as the professional ramifications, resulting in “less self control, self respect, and work efficiency....the long term prices being depression, probability of ulcers and hypertension, alcoholism, and overreaction to moderate amounts of stress.”

This study stems from the experiences of an elementary school teacher who has been teaching in the inner city of Los Angeles for the past 10 years. In 1998, as graduate of Santa Clara University, this teacher moved to Los Angeles to pursue a teaching career in the urban areas of South Central Los Angeles. Being put into a classroom of 30 students in the public school systems almost immediately, this educator, who only had a degree in Sociology, felt overwhelmed and unprepared for the demands of the classroom from the first day of school. For the next two years, this teacher would go through classes in Los Angeles Unified School District’s Intern Program and learn how to be a school teacher. Those initial feelings of stress, however, would never leave. Ten years later, after continuous teaching in the elementary grades, this teacher would have to take a year off from classroom teaching to regroup, recollect, and renew him self. He experienced this phenomenon called burnout.

It is therefore from this perspective and experience that this look into teacher burnout begins. In order to avoid burnout and continue to work effectively, educators must be made aware of the signs and symptoms of burnout. Teachers need to be informed

of strategies to prevent and recover from burnout, and teachers need to take steps to protect their profession.

It is helpful when looking at burnout to understand the history of burnout. Burnout was a term coined in the 1970's in the USA to describe "a number of social and personal problems afflicting workers" (Shukla, 2008). According to Friedman (2000), burnout is a "work-related syndrome that most often occurs in those working face to face with service recipients in need of assistance". Pines and Aronson (1988) define work burnout as a "long term emotional state resulting in physical, emotional and psychological exhaustion." Farber (1991) characterizes burnout as "a work related syndrome coming from the individuals' cognition of a serious imbalance between input and output."

In recent years (Shukla, 2008), teachers have shown an increasing number of signs of burnout thus leading to more investigation and research into teacher burnout. Teacher burnout has been addressed in literature from around the world, all the way from Africa (Asimeng-Boaahene, 2003), to China (Zhang, 2006), to Hong Kong (Lau, 2005), and to Norway (Skaalvik, 2007). Looking specifically at "teacher burnout", "scholars define "teacher burnout" as a condition caused by depersonalization, exhaustion, and a diminished sense of accomplishment (Schwab et al., 1986). According to Shukla (2008), there is not one universal definition of teacher burnout; all that one can do when looking at teacher burnout is look for the symptoms of its presence. This is similar to looking at the fruit of a tree, to discover what type of tree it is.

As indicated by the vast number of working definitions of teacher burnout, indeed Shukla is correct. Psychologically speaking, Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978) define teacher

burnout as a “syndrome resulting from teachers’ inability to protect themselves against threats to their self esteem and well being.” McCarthy (2009) individually defines teacher burnout as a “loss of idealism and enthusiasm for work.” Burnout, as characterized by Yong (2008), prevents teacher from “fully realizing their potential or effectively carrying out their duties”. Maslach (1984), a leading researcher in the field of burnout, defined burnout as the loss of concern for the people with whom one is working, and Freudenberger (1977) describes burnout as “physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from excessive demands on energy, strength or resources.” In simple, layman terms, burnout will be described as the state a teacher enters into when they no longer have the drive, passion, or motivation to love their students and teach them what they need to learn. The nature of the teaching job is to give of ones time and energy, and a teacher who burns out continually experiences the sensation of being emptied, but never being filled back up.

Physically and emotionally, symptoms of burnout Shukla (2008) include a teachers tendency to “withdraw emotionally from the demands of the job...reflected in emotional exhaustion, apathy, physical fatigue, lack of energy, psychosomatic illness, increased alcohol and drug consumption, cynicism, inappropriate anger, depression, and lack of personal achievements.” These symptoms are generally accepted across the board of the multiple articles reviewed. Emotional exhaustion, characterized by never being able to get enough rest, and withdrawal and cynicism toward students, such as wanting to be nice but not having the energy to overlook and forgive faults, all are indicators which point to a teacher who is burnt out (Friedman, 2000). Burnt out teachers experience a sense of unaccomplishment in their profession, and the world seems to conspire against

them (Friedman, 2000). In addition, Curtis (2009) defined signs of burnout as the stunting of creativity, such as when a teacher can simply think of no new ideas. Work just becomes a monotonous day job.

It is imperative when looking at burnout that one makes the connection between burnout and stress. Several of the symptoms of a burnt-out teacher are those symptoms that are indicative of stress. These symptoms include frequent illness, a nervous condition, mental lapses, an inability to organize, and depression. Clouse and Whitaker (1981) postulated that a teacher burns-out in three, distinct phases. Stage one of teacher burnout, involves the initial experience of failure within the educators professional performance. This challenges the educators pre-conceived notions of being able to help the students, and the teacher's initial motivation, value system, and ideals begin to falter. As expectations continue to fail over a longer period of time, frustration ensues. This is stage number two. Finally, as frustration increases over time, a loss of meaningfulness in one's work arises. Teachers begin to alienate themselves and view their students as impersonal objects. This is the onset of stage number three. A burnt-out teacher at this phase no longer reconciles their performance with their expectations. Friedman (2000) labels this phenomenon as a discrepancy between a teacher's self efficacy and their actual performance. Teacher's ideas of what they can accomplish no longer match the performance they see in themselves day in and day out.

Friedman (2000), also states that there are three phases of teacher burnout. Friedman's research into stress in Israeli teachers led him to conclude that the stages of burnout are directly correlated to stress, as did Clouse and Whitaker. According to Friedman, the steps toward burnout include "the emergence of stress, the emergence of

stress-induced experiences,” and finally, “the emergence of reactions to the stress-induced experiences” (Friedman, 2000). It is helpful to look at teacher burnout as occurring in varying degrees, because the educator can take a step back and evaluate themselves to see if they fit into any of these three stages of burnout. If necessary, they can then make adjustments to their profession so that they do not continue to walk down the path of burnout.

While teachers may burn out in stages, Haberman (2005) and Yong (2007) highlight two *types* of burnt-out teachers. Haberman and Yong assert that there are those teachers who burnout but who stay in the profession, despite being burnout; and there are those teachers who burnout and decide to leave the teaching profession. These two different types of burnt out teachers have a different affect upon the scope of education in a school. In addition, when looking statistically at teacher burnout at the beginning of this review, measurements largely measure those teachers who burnt-out and left the profession, not those who burnt-out and stayed. Those who stay in the profession Haberman coins as “strong insensitives”. These strong insensitives are more dangerous to the teaching profession (Haberman, 2005 and Yong, 2007), because they no longer have the ability, drive and desire to teach. They pose a threat to the academic achievement, morale, and camaraderie of the academic institution.

The second type of burnt-out teacher Haberman identifies as “idealists”. These teachers may have had grand notions in starting to teach. As they were faced with the reality of bureaucracy, student behavior and curriculum, however, they decided to leave. One can conclude that whether a teacher leaves or stays, burnout is a serious condition that affects the quality and service of education.

Teacher burnout has been most largely and widely measured by an assessment tool called The Maslach Burnout Inventory test. This scale was used both by McCarthy (2009) and Clausen (2009) in the articles reviewed. Adaptations of the Maslach test have been adapted internationally (Skaalvik, 2007) to fit individual assessment needs (Appendix B). These assessments evaluate a teacher's response to items in various subject areas. These areas include classroom management, student behavior, teacher mental health, and parent-colleague relationships.

After defining teacher burnout and peeking into how it is measured, one turns to the essential question of what factors cause teacher burnout. To begin, Goodlad (1990), states that "teaching the young has never been easy....but once upon a time, not so long ago in the history of our nation, teaching the young in schools was very much easier than it is today....Teaching is getting more difficult. The problems are more numerous, and social changes have affected communities and neighborhoods" (Hansen, 2002; Perkinson, 1968). As the literature turns from exploring what burnout is, to looking at possible reason for why teachers burnout, let the reader keep in mind that education in today's world is in a different place from where it has been in the past. Today's society is increasingly urban. More people are moving into urban areas and living in urban areas than ever before. Teachers today must deal with policy changes in education, large class sizes of behaviorally challenged students, and a variety of language and cultural differences. All of these factors contribute to teacher stress, and teacher burnout.

It is therefore essential to begin connecting the stress that a teacher experiences in their profession to levels teacher burnout. As teacher stress levels increase, so does teacher burnout. Sorenson (2007) quotes a study done by the American Association of

Stress stating that two of the top ten most stressful jobs in the United States are related to teaching positions in the inner city. Haberman (2009), states that teachers as a whole experience more stress than non-teachers. So, in looking at burnout, one must understand stress.

In defining stress and relating stress to burnout, it may be helpful to connect ones head knowledge to ones personal experience. To do this, Sorenson (2007) humorously defines stress as a “condition created when ones mind overrides the desire to choke someone who desperately needs it.” On a serious note, Sorenson (2007) defines stress as a “dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint, urgency, pressure, (or) mental or physical tension as related to outcomes, uncertain and certain.” Hiebert (1998) and Lazarus (1984) defined work stress as the “reactions of persons who feel that external demands are beyond their endurance.”

In an interesting statement by Dr. Esther Sternberg of the National Institute of Mental Health, Dr. Sternberg explained the affect of stress on the working brain: “When you’re at peak performance, just the nerve cells needed for the response are firing. But in protracted or very stressful situations, too many nerve cells fire at once. That is when you freeze....And a whole lot of small hassles can have the same effect as a major stressor (2008).

Researchers have thus begun to look at stress and its relationship to teachers, and correlate the effect of stress on teacher burnout. One model theory of stress, the Person-Environment Fit Model of Stress (French, Caplan, & Van Harrison, 1982) states that stress is a result of a lack of fit between environmental demands and personal abilities. All theories, Friedman (2000) states, focus on the discrepancy between the expected and

the observed performance of the individual teacher in any given context. Stress levels can be very high for teacher, which is a major reason why teachers' burnout; but what factors are unique to the teaching profession that makes it so stressful?

As Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov (2003) point out, there are many reasons for teachers to feel stress on the job. Stress for the educator can be a combination of many variables, and not just one specific, identifiable stimuli. More factors that contribute to stress may contribute to higher frequencies of teacher burnout. This may be one of the reasons teaching in urban areas produces some of the highest rates of teacher burnout.

Some researchers, (Friedman, 2000), argue that stress may begin as early as the first day of school. "The transition from schooling to the work arena", Friedman states, "is often a harsh one, even from those teachers who receive support and guidance from veteran teachers. As one teacher said, "I had no idea what to do. I had no idea what I had let myself into. Where should I start? How could I get them to be quiet? It was an extreme shock, a nightmare" (Friedman, 2000).

Clausen and Petruka (2009) researched stress in the school setting, and found that teacher stress could be linked to three major areas; "systemic factors that were part of the institutional and political organization, factors...intrinsic to the teaching profession, and outside factors that affected the vulnerability of (the) individual teacher." In a survey of over 800 British and French teachers, Travers and Cooper (1997) found that participants largely blamed their number one cause of stress on the "constant push for systemic reform." Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a model, Arhyris (1957) stated that any time an individual is working for an organization in which they have little or no control, conflict arises. According to findings based on the Maslach Burnout Inventory test,

Friedman (1995) stated that classroom management and discipline maintenance are two of the greatest sources of teacher stress.

As is evident, there is multiple reasons for teacher stress. One can conjecture that this stress is in fact caused by a plethora of smaller variables that contribute to the overall stress teachers feel. Each one of these factors will be mentioned, and each one of them is unique and warrant further study in their contribution to teacher stress and its affect upon burnout. It is not this literature reviews purpose, however, to look at each variable and determine its affects upon burnout, but rather provide a case for the many variables that cause stress for the educator. Yong (2007), in looking at Chinese educators, discusses the pressure put on teachers by parents and administration to help students succeed. When students do not succeed, teachers are blamed for their failure. Large classrooms, inadequate teaching resources and materials, behavioral problems, an inability to effectively deal with behavioral problems, a disconnect with administration, a lack of parental support, bureaucracy, poor working conditions, safety, time demands, adjusting to educational reforms, poor training, and external pressures to adjust and adapt to the expectations put on teachers are all causes that contribute to teacher stress.

When looking at teacher stress, one can also take into account the individual characteristics of a teacher's assignment. Other factors mentioned in the literature reviewed that contribute to teacher stress and may increase or decrease the probability of burnout included the ethnicity of the teacher, the perceived expectations of the nature of a teachers job, individual personalities, gender, suburban vs. urban school location, large vs. small school district, elementary vs. secondary education, a year-round vs. traditional school calendar, and teaching regular or special education. As a general trend, it seems

the most stressful teaching positions which lead to burnout include factors that require a high work load on the teacher with limited amount of social support.

A teacher's job is not a normal nine to five job. Indeed, the teachers who teach out of a love for their students find themselves involved in a number of difficult situations that are stressful. Challenging choices and decisions are made daily, all the way from when to report child abuse, to finding enough time to grade assessments. A teacher's time quickly slips from their hands, and work is frequently taken home. Even if physical paperwork is not taken home, the teacher who cares for their students mentally takes the issues of their classroom home with them.

An initial look at the many strains of the teaching profession may leave some feeling discouraged. With all of these factors contributing to stress, resulting in burnout, is there anyway to prevent burnout and leave room for personal time, sanity, and growth. How can teacher burnout be prevented and checked? Some scholars (Lambert & McCarthy, 2006) feel that it is still unclear about how best to help teachers prevent burnout. Lambert & McCarthy (2006) state this ambiguity is due to a majority of job burnout studies over the past 30 years focusing on workplace conditions rather than intra- and interpersonal factors of the teachers. They presume that it is not the factors outside the teaching profession that cause a teacher to burn-out, but rather the inner workings of the teacher that make them ill-prepared.

While personal skills may play a role in the prevention and recovery from burnout, it is the opinion of the literature reviewer that no matter the difficulty of the teaching profession, a person who is called by God to teach can overcome the obstacles of burnout. With determination and God's grace, one can perform their teaching service

excellently to Him. Proverbs 19:8 says that “He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; he who cherishes understanding prospers.” Thus, the first step in preventing and recovering from burnout is in acknowledging that burnout can be a reality. If one recognizes that burnout happens, then one may be more inclined to safeguard and protect their time. The educator can move forward in wisdom, taking practical steps that will prevent burnout.

Friedman (2000) states that one practical step in preventing burnout is to begin with teacher training programs that adequately prepare teachers for the demands of the job. In other words, teachers should be taught from the college level about the demands of the teaching profession. They should be equipped with stress management techniques that they will need in the field of education. Educators should not enter the teaching profession thinking of teaching as a pie in the sky type job where they will heal all the social problems of the world. Rather, teachers in training should recognize the reality of the demands of the teaching profession.

For those already in the field of education, Yong (2008), Malikow (2007), and Clausen (2009) all similarly point to sharing the burden of stress with others. Malikow (2007) and Clausen (2009), think it is necessary for teachers to recognize what variables are creating stress, and then “locating people and structures within the school environment that can alleviate or remove the stressor.” An important, yet previously overlooked aspect of dealing with stress was found in the usage of community. Howard and Johnson (2004) commented that “an environment should be created in which teachers feel free to disclose their stress to administrators.” This is a fascinating conclusion. An article titled “Tending the Garden”, asserted that “it is important for all members of a school to understand the symptoms (of stress) and help provide support and relief”

towards burnout. This article was written by scholars who run a Catholic school, and as the body of Christ, the idea of community and its role in alleviating and preventing stress demands attention and thought. One can proactively ask themselves if they are doing all they can to create an environment that is not only free from unnecessary stress, but also conducive to alleviating, healing and recovering from stress. This would include counseling, and forming a peer support group, if needed.

Some of the quickest and easiest stress management techniques come in the form of the individual taking care of themselves. Many times the work week for a teacher extends well beyond the normal 40 hour week. This is unhealthy because it leaves no time for the teacher to satisfy their personal needs. Teachers must set time constraints upon themselves (Yong, 2007), and not bring work home. Although challenging, an educator who is serious about continuing in education must learn to say “no” to tasks and responsibilities that are too big for them. Taking care of oneself also includes eating well and eating regularly; sleeping, and having time for personal exercise and study. Sorenson (2007) also advised limited caffeine and alcohol intake.

Ruth Botwink (2002) of New York City relays some interesting feedback given by veteran teachers of over 20 years. These teachers gave the following advice: “Realize that you cannot be the teacher, parent, and mentor to each student. Set realistic limits. When you leave school, focus on the rest of your life. Stay physically active and have a sense of humor. Get involved professionally outside of the classroom, such as conferences or writing articles. Change grade levels (to keep things fresh), and form a group of teachers at your school who you can share with. Take vacations during the holidays and keep your classroom and papers organized (2002).” Furthermore, Skaalvik

(2007) briefly highlights some helpful stress management techniques for teachers; active problem solving, cooperating with parents, and changing teacher strategies.

Sadly absent from the literature reviewed was mention of the teacher taking time off to rest and recuperate. Some real decisions must be made in order to reduce stress and prevent burning out. This may include having to say “no” to friends on the weekend, in order to take time for a hike or some quiet time alone. Educators need to discover what types of activities refresh and renew them, and take time to practice those activities weekly.

Hansen (2002) challenges the educator to reconsider why it is that they teach. In a moving call to arms, Hansen looks at our nation, and reminds educators that they teach for a four-fold reason; to enculture the young in a democracy, to provide access to knowledge, to develop students with a nurturing pedagogy, and to be good stewards of education within the community (Smith and Hughes, 1997). This final point is stirring for educators who have left home to teach in inner cities or abroad where educational reform and inspiration is needed. Hansen challenges the educator to stay involved in the process of education by conversing with others and expressing his or her opinion. He also recommends that educators reflect, and be a part of change that takes place in schools. By participating actively in the education process, the chances that an educator will burn-out will decrease. This involves a level of vulnerability and humility on the part of the attitude of the educators.

Continuing education also helps an educator prevent and/or recover from burnout. Continuing education is difficult for teachers, because they often feel that their time is stretched thin enough. This element of investing time into further education, however,

may be an important variable in preventing burnout. Friedman (2000) says that teachers should continue to participate in workshops that develop their professional teaching skills, classroom organization, humor and amiability in teaching.

At one urban school in Los Angeles, the literature reviewer has also witnessed a new aspect of teaching which an educator may consider if they are feeling burnout: team teaching. It seems that this practice is growing in popularity. Team teaching protects the time of the individual teacher by sharing the workload of a classroom. While some researches state that team teaching can be difficult, the plusses for the burnt out teacher seem to outweigh the negative.

In conclusion, the idea of teacher burnout has been explored. Teacher stress, as related to burnout, has been shown to be the main cause of burnout. The reality of teacher burnout is real, and there are many factors that contribute to the stress placed on a teacher, including large classes, paperwork, time, bureaucracy, and policy changes in education. A burnt out teacher is an ineffective teacher, and several methods of reducing stress have been presented, including proper management of time, rest, further education, and team teaching. Hopefully, this research will contribute practically to the renewed passion and experience of the teaching professional, and teachers will be empowered to continue to teach to the best of their abilities.

Appendix A

Sample Norwegian Teacher Self Efficacy Scale (Skaalvik, 2007) based off of Maslach

Inventory

How certain are you that you can:

Instruction

1. Explain central themes in your subjects so even the low achieving students can understand.
2. Provide good guidance and instruction to all students regardless of ability level.

Maintain Discipline

1. Maintain discipline in any school class or group.
2. Control even the most aggressive students.

Cope with change

1. Successfully use any instructional method the school decides to use.
2. Manage instruction regardless of how it is organized.

Motivate Students

1. Get all students in class to work hard with their schoolwork.
2. Wake the desire to learn even among the lowest achieving students.

Response Categories: (1) not certain at all, (3) quite uncertain, (5) quite certain, (7)
absolutely certain

Appendix B

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